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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 000858

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/20/2017
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SUBJECT: YUSUF STILL KEY TO SOMALI RECONCILIATION; ERITREA
POSES PROBLEMS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR DONALD YAMAMOTO. REASON: 1.4 (B), (D).

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles told Ambassador and SIMAS chief March 19 that Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG) President Abdullahi Yusuf was the best hope for the stabilization of Somalia. Leadership changes, particularly in the prime ministership, are necessary, but must await until after the Somali reconciliation conference in April. Meles said Yusuf was a transitional figure, which made him the best candidate to help the country stabilize and transition to a new and stronger government with wide support. The PM cautioned that the international community could not and must not side with any clan; even through good intentions the international community could derail the peace process or inflame clan divisions. There must be absolute support for the Somali peace process, no matter how long it takes, and there must be a commitment to help the TFG financially and politically to ensure success in the Somali peace process, Meles said.

¶2. (S/NF) The Prime Minister warned that Eritrea was looming as a larger problem, using terrorism to undercut Ethiopia and to break up the peace process in Somalia. To avoid conflict with Eritrea, a stiff warning from the UN Security Council would help defuse Eritrea's terrorist activities against Ethiopia and the region. END SUMMARY.

YUSUF REMAINS KEY

¶3. (S/NF) Prime Minister Meles saw Ambassador (note-taker) and SIMAS chief March 19 to discuss the prospects for peace and stability in Somalia. Asked whether President Yusuf had the strength of will and support to lead the nation through the reconciliation process, Meles said Yusuf had courage and was respected by the other clans. Though a Darood, Yusuf had Hawiye relatives. Yusuf did not have the health to continue past his 2009 mandate, and, as a transitional figure without future political ambitions, he was the right person to lead the nation through the reconciliation process, Meles said.

¶4. (S/NF) Meles said Yusuf's selection of Ali Mahdi, a Hawiye and prominent business leader, to lead the five-member independent council to look at the selection of a new

government, would make the political process more robust. Political changes would occur after the reconciliation conference in April, including the selection of a new Prime Minister and other ministers.

¶5. (S/NF) Meles cautioned that the most difficult task was "balancing" the selection of clan representation at the conference and in a new government. While Ethiopia and the TFG have focused on the Hawiye/Habr-Gedir/Ayr sub-clan, it was clear that larger clans like the Rahanweyn and others were offended. It has become necessary for Yusuf to mend fences and cater to all the clans. The Ayr sub-clan, to increase their strength and representation at the national reconciliation conference, has pushed for civil society and other groups. To limit representation and to keep a lid on smaller clans dominating the proceedings, Meles said representation would be limited to around 3,000.

¶6. (S/NF) The issue for the conference, and a new government which would be formed after the conference, will be "numbers" vs. "capacity". By selecting a new government which would be representative of all the clans, Yusuf has opted to be inclusive, rather than to select a small group based solely on expertise. Yusuf wants a broad range of support, according to Meles.

RECONCILIATION CONFERENCE: MANY CHALLENGES REMAIN

¶7. (S/NF) Two challenges confront the TFG as it holds the reconciliation conference: money, and stability in Mogadishu. The conference will be expensive, and international support will be needed. Second, stability in

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Mogadishu is key to stability for the entire country, and for the holding of the conference. Meles said the Ethiopian military (ENDF) was providing force protection for the TFG, the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and for the conference. But in discussions with Yusuf, it was clear to the Ethiopians that there had to be political dialogue to ensure that the clans put a hold on the violence. Without clan support for the conference, Meles asserted, the conference would not succeed.

¶8. (S/NF) Meles dispatched Foreign Minister Seyoum to Mogadishu to solicit clan support for the conference. This would enable the ENDF and TFG to guarantee security in Mogadishu during the conference, Meles said. It would take time, he added, but working each clan carefully would lead to a safer and more secure Mogadishu.

ENDF TO STAY; ERITREA IS A PROBLEM

¶9. (S/NF) Meles reaffirmed his previous private statements to us and to senior USG visitors that the ENDF would continue to be in Somalia to provide necessary force protection for the TFG and the new Somali government. Currently, ENDF forces guard the airport and seaport, as well as support AMISOM and the upcoming reconciliation conference. The ENDF will withdraw troops at a later date, but it will be measured, and in keeping with their commitment to support security in Mogadishu and Somalia.

¶10. (S/NF) A looming threat to Ethiopia and to Somalia was Eritrea, Meles said. Its terrorist activities in support of extremists in Somalia and the recent kidnappings of five British Embassy staff and thirteen Ethiopians were acts of terrorism. Meles noted that the general Ethiopian public was deeply concerned with the constant attacks by Eritrea along the border, as well as the recent kidnappings. Even opposition parties had criticized Meles for not taking a bolder stance against Eritrea.

¶11. (S/NF) Meles said he was not looking for conflict with Eritrea, but added that a strong message from the UN Security Council could be an effective signal to Eritrea to stop its activities. It would also help calm Ethiopian domestic constituents pushing for a stronger position against Eritrea.

¶12. (S/NF) COMMENT: Dedicating some two divisions in Somalia, Meles is clearly trying to avoid another war front in a potential conflict with Eritrea. Promoting a UNSC resolution against Eritrea, similar to the one Ethiopia advocated against Sudan after the attempted assassination on Egyptian President Mubarak in 1996 in Addis Ababa, would help calm domestic furor over the hostage-taking, warn Eritrea to cease its activities, hopefully lessen the potential for direct conflict, and possibly keep alive the 8-9 remaining Ethiopian hostages reportedly being held in Eritrea. On the larger issue of Somalia, Meles sees no other alternative to Yusuf, and believes the international community, despite the lack of confidence by some in Yusuf,s skills, must remain supportive of Yusuf, the TFG and the reconciliation conference. Any changes or undercutting of Yusuf,s position could potentially derail the peace process and plunge Somalia into chaos. END COMMENT.
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